

Morale and Meritocracy

Responding to the call for “Evaluating Military Officer Promotion and Selection Procedures”

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Evaluating Military Officer Promotion and Selection Procedures

The 20 June 2025, memorandum from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD) underscores a critical imperative: ensuring “fair, transparent, colorblind, and merit-based processes” for selecting and promoting military officers.¹ The memo directs all Services to examine policies and procedures and to apply objective standards when selecting and promoting military leaders across four key areas:

Evaluations. Current performance evaluations across the Services, and the objective markers associated with each.

- Promotion Selection Boards. Current promotion board processes.
- Command Selection Boards. The training continuum for officer development including how officers are selected and chosen for formal command roles.
- Professional Military Education (PME). The impact of PME on assessing officers.²

This directive arrives at a pivotal moment for the U.S. military, amid great-power competition and evolving threats that demand resilient, cohesive forces. Talent management of the U.S. military officer corps is a top priority, as the memo highlights, and this review will provide valuable feedback to enhance the lethality of the force by “identify[ing] and select[ing] the best talent in our ranks.”³

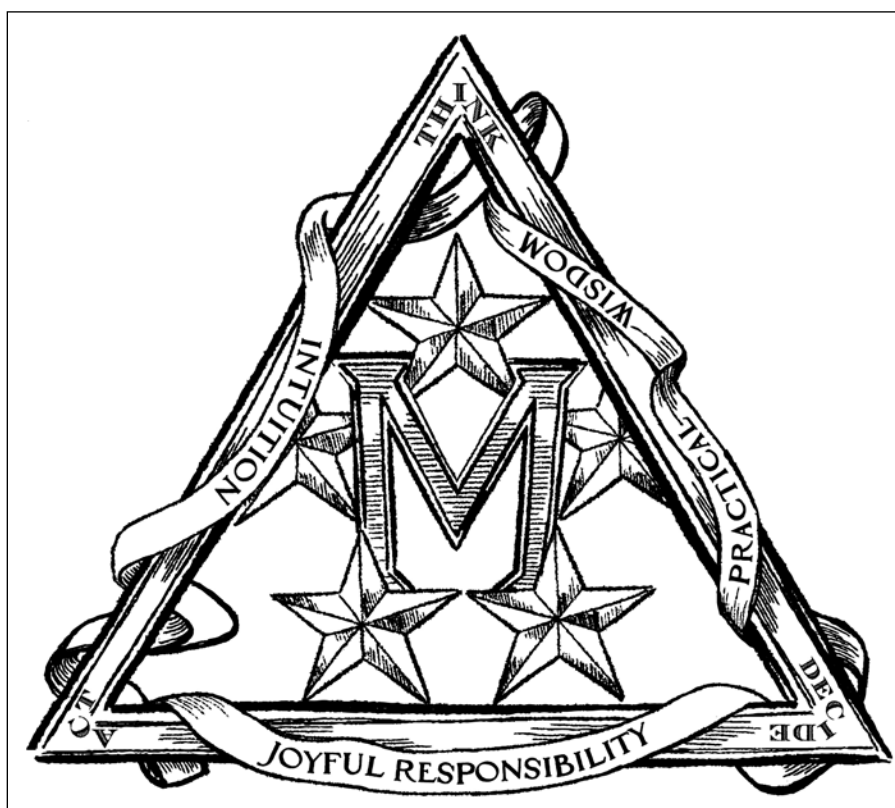
In response, this article posits that morale—the enduring spirit that sustains units through adversity—must be elevated as a core metric in officer evaluations, promotion, and selection. Morale is not peripheral; it is a moral

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Marshall Trinity. (image was created by Blair McDermott.)

responsibility intrinsic to command, indicative of an officer’s virtue and predictive of unit effectiveness. We propose the *Marshall Trinity*, a framework derived from GEN George C. Marshall’s

leadership philosophies, to guide reforms. Marshall believed “morale is primarily a function of command,”⁴ and this model integrates joyful acceptance of responsibility (*verantwortungsfreud-*

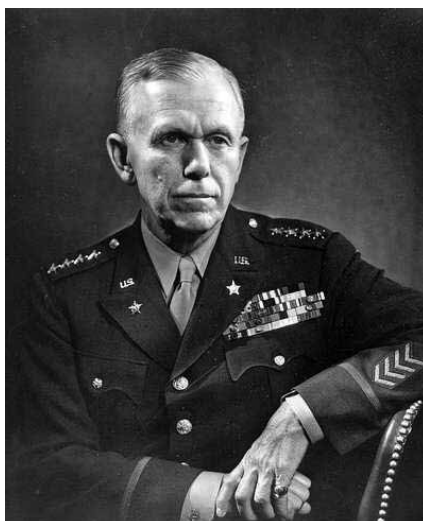
igkeitt), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and intuitive grasp (*coup d'œil*) to assess officers' capacity to foster morale.

As GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower affirmed: "Morale is the greatest single factor in successful wars."⁵ Despite technological advances and doctrinal reform, the enduring truth remains—morale is a decisive element of military effectiveness, and commanders are its chief stewards.

By embedding this framework into the review areas outlined in the memo, the Joint Force can standardize assessments, bridge Service-specific gaps, and select commanders who not only meet legal obligations but also embody moral stewardship. This article deconstructs morale, establishes its moral dimension, defines the Marshall Trinity, evaluates current assessment tools, and offers recommendations aligned with the memo's directives.

Deconstructing Morale: From Concept to Command Imperative

Joint Publication 1, Volume 1, defines command as "the lawful authority ... a commander exercises over subordinates," accompanied by responsibility "for the health, welfare, morale, and



Gen George C. Marshall, 1947. (Photo: Dutch National Archives.)

transient satisfaction—that gives morale its operational and moral significance. Marshall criticized efforts that equated morale with amenities or creature comforts, insisting that real morale "springs from the pride which an individual feels for the Army, and more especially for his unit."⁹ Morale exists along a spectrum:

- *Individual morale*: a soldier's personal well-being and motivation.

If morale is a command responsibility, then its meaning must be commonly understood—and its cultivation, assessed.

discipline of assigned personnel."⁶ Yet, morale remains the most ambiguous among these obligations.

Military doctrine, sociology, and psychology offer varied interpretations. Some link it to individual welfare or satisfaction; others to collective resilience or fighting spirit. The DOD's Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) defines morale as "the confidence, enthusiasm, collective pride, and willingness to persist in the activities of the group."⁷ GEN George C. Marshall described it as "staying power—the spirit which endures to the end—the will to win."⁸ It is this enduring spirit—not

- *Individual-in-the-group morale*: a member's engagement and identity within the team.

- *Group morale*: shared confidence in mission, leadership, and mutual trust.

Research supports the link between high morale and operational outcomes. A study of British forces in Afghanistan found that units with strong morale exhibited fewer mental health issues and greater combat readiness.¹⁰ Canadian research similarly connected high morale with retention, trust, and willingness to deploy.¹¹ RAND's ongoing work on "will to fight" identifies morale as a critical variable for understanding

unit cohesion and perseverance under adversity.¹²

Despite this evidence, the DOD lacks a standardized, joint definition of morale. The absence of definitional clarity undermines efforts to evaluate officers' ability to foster morale and weakens morale's standing in promotion and selection processes. If morale is a command responsibility, then its meaning must be commonly understood—and its cultivation, assessed.

The next section advances the argument that morale is more than an operational condition; it is a moral responsibility.

"First in importance will be the development of a high morale. This is the essence of the American standard of discipline, and it is a primary responsibility of leaders to develop and maintain such a standard."¹³

—GEN George C. Marshall

Morale as Legal and Moral Responsibility

Across all U.S. military branches, commanders are legally responsible for morale. Title 10 of the United States Code mandates that officers "promote and safeguard the morale, the physical well-being, and the general welfare of the officers and enlisted persons under their command."¹⁴ While doctrine affirms this duty, officer selection processes often treat morale as peripheral—a byproduct of leadership, not its essence.

This distinction matters. A commander can fulfill the letter of the law while failing to embrace its spirit. Aristotle envisioned the virtuous person as one who does not merely comply with

orders, but is disposed to act rightly, for the right reasons, and in the right way.¹⁵ Legal obligation may ensure minimal competence, but moral responsibility embraces purpose.

The June 2025 DOD memo calls for reevaluating how the Services assess officer performance and select commanders. This moment presents an opportunity to elevate morale as both a leadership output and a character-based input. If morale is central to readiness and retention, it should be central to evaluation, selection, and professional development.

A moral framework can bridge this gap. When morale is seen not only as a doctrinal task but as *a commander's moral responsibility*, it becomes measurable through the habits, judgments, and actions that sustain it—especially under pressure.

“Morale is a function of command. Therefore, as far as the efforts of the Army itself are concerned, the initial corrective measure to be undertaken is improvement of officer personnel.”¹⁶

—GEN George C. Marshall

The Marshall Trinity: A Framework for Moral Command

What distinguishes a commander capable of fostering morale under pressure from one who simply complies with institutional standards? The answer is not merely tactical competence or procedural knowledge—it is moral character, expressed through sound judgment in ambiguous conditions. To identify and develop such leaders, and to address the memo's call for enhanced evaluations, we propose a three-part framework derived from GEN George C. Marshall's life and leadership legacy: *The Marshall Trinity*.

The trinity consists of:

1. *Verantwortungsfreudigkeit*: the joyful acceptance of responsibility.
2. *Phronēsis*: the virtue of practical wisdom.
3. *Coup d'oeil*: intuitive discernment, particularly in crisis.

Together, these traits represent more than aspirational ideals; they constitute a model for officer development, selection, and evaluation. Each component is discussed below in the context of building command-ready leaders across the Joint Force.

Verantwortungsfreudigkeit: Joyful Responsibility

Originating in German military doctrine, *verantwortungsfreudigkeit* refers to a leader's eagerness—not acceptance—to assume responsibility, particularly in situations marked by uncertainty or risk.¹⁷ Rather than deflecting or delaying, these leaders step forward with a sense of internal compulsion. As Clausewitz suggested, the burden of command is often moral before it is operational.¹⁸ It is in the “emptiness of the battlefield” where the

promotion systems that prioritize career conservatism over moral boldness. *Verantwortungsfreudigkeit* informs how a virtuous commander acts, while the next component of the trinity describes how they decide.

Phronēsis: Practical Wisdom

Drawn from Aristotelian ethics, *phronēsis* is the habit of right decision making under variable conditions.²⁰ It is not reducible to doctrinal familiarity or technical knowledge. Rather, it is the fusion of experience, ethics, and situational awareness into wise decision making. As Barry Schwartz writes, it is the “capacity to know the right thing to do in a particular circumstance and the courage actually to do it.”²¹

Practical wisdom is what enables a commander to navigate the “gray zones” of leadership: balancing mission success with troop welfare, choosing when to enforce and when to empathize, and judging how best to respond when morale falters. Assessment tools can approximate this trait by testing scenario-based decision making or behavioral interviews conducted by trained senior leaders. The last component of the trinity describes how the commander thinks.

Coup d'oeil: Intuitive Grasp

Clausewitz described *coup d'oeil* as the “quick recognition of truth” in combat—a synthesis of perception and insight that allows the commander to see clearly amid the fog of war.²² Today, this extends beyond battlefield awareness to include organizational perception, emotional intelligence, and leadership instinct.

As commanding officers are inundated with information or experiencing a dearth of it, the cognitive ability to “see things simply” is a fundamental aspect of decision making.²³ The ability to grasp an inchoate feeling and rapidly extricate the relevant factors is a precursor to a decision-making cycle aimed at achieving an optimal outcome. The varying degrees of intuition matter. While a novice may perceive a stimulus and eventually arrive at a decision, “[e]xperts have effective responses because they have effective thinking patterns.

Practical wisdom is what enables a commander to navigate the “gray zones” ...

joy of responsibility allows the leader to continue to lead and “endure the situation.”¹⁹

In command selection, this trait is observable in patterns of initiative, willingness to lead in austere environments, and the absence of excuse-making in the face of institutional friction. The Army's Command Assessment Program (CAP) and the Navy Leadership Assessment Program (NLAP) represent early efforts to screen for this quality, but it remains undervalued in conventional

They pay attention to the right cues and retrieve useful mental models.”²⁴ Marshall was lauded for his ability “to make quick yet informed decisions.”²⁵ He used “surveyable rules” as a modality to “take in and understand as a whole.”²⁶

In PME and officer evaluation, we should reward officers who demonstrate this intuitive clarity—not just in combat, but in understanding human terrain, identifying morale shifts, and responding preemptively. Studies on expertise suggest that intuition is not mystical; it is the product of experience, reflection, and pattern recognition.²⁷ Commanders who demonstrate *coup d’oeil* can discern when morale is slipping before metrics confirm it.

Synthesis: A Unified Model for Leadership Assessment

The elements of the Marshall Trinity are not independent traits—they work in concert. Responsibility must be joined with wisdom and informed by intuition. In operational terms, they map onto the OODA loop: *coup d’oeil* allows the commander to observe and orient, *phronēsis* governs the decision,

and command selection. The June 2025 DOD memorandum charges the Services with improving how we “identify and select the best talent in our ranks” to lead the Joint Force.²⁸ To do so, we must improve how we assess the qualities embedded in the Marshall Trinity. Three current initiatives provide case studies in this effort: the Army’s CAP, the NLAP, and the DEOCS.

Army’s Command Assessment Program

Established in 2020, CAP evaluates officers vying for battalion and brigade command. It combines written assessments, cognitive and non-cognitive testing, peer and subordinate feedback, psychologist interviews, and leader panels.²⁹ One of its most valuable innovations is the ability to identify counterproductive leadership—a key cause of low morale and readiness degradation. *Army Doctrine Publication 6-22* defines counterproductive leadership as behavior that violates Army values and undermines unit cohesion.³⁰ The CAP’s holistic approach allows selection boards to screen not just for performance, but for fitness to com-

awareness, and team building.³² Unlike CAP, NLAP is not yet required across the force, but it signals a shift toward character-based evaluation and coaching. Notably, NLAP identifies traits aligned with morale cultivation, such as humility, empathy, and personal example—traits that are often praised in retirement speeches but rarely assessed or developed through focused coaching. Still, morale is not explicitly assessed, and its voluntary nature leaves implementation uneven.

Defense Organizational Climate Survey

The DEOCS is a recurring, anonymous survey that provides commanders with feedback on climate factors—including morale, cohesion, trust, and toxic leadership.³³ While potentially valuable, DEOCS has critical limitations. First, participation is voluntary, and commanders cannot craft their questions. Second, results are often viewed as diagnostics rather than metrics of command performance. And third, DEOCS data is rarely linked to command screening or performance evaluations. Despite these limitations, DEOCS reflects institutional recognition that morale can be measured—and that commanders bear responsibility for shaping it.

Toward Joint Standardization

These programs signal progress, but they remain fragmented. If morale is to matter at the enterprise level, the Services should pursue a *joint standard* for assessing commanders’ impact on morale before, during, and after command. The Marshall Trinity offers a common evaluative language:

- *Responsibility* (*verantwortungsfreudigkeit*) can be screened in command interviews and 360 evaluations.
- *Wisdom* (*phronēsis*) can be tested through scenario-based simulations.
- *Intuition* (*coup d’oeil*) can be identified through pattern recognition, peer feedback, and operational decision-making history.

The final section offers actionable recommendations to embed these concepts into officer development and PME pipelines across the force.

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and *verantwortungsfreudigkeit* drives action. A commander who embodies the Marshall Trinity does not merely comply with expectations—they inspire trust, enable cohesion, and build resilient teams. These are the outcomes the 2025 DOD memo seeks to institutionalize, and this framework offers a concrete way to assess and select officers who can achieve them.

Assessment Models: Identifying Commanders Who Foster Morale

If morale is a moral responsibility—and a strategic necessity—then the ability to cultivate it must become a standard element of officer evaluation

and command selection. The June 2025 DOD memorandum charges the Services with improving how we “identify and select the best talent in our ranks” to lead the Joint Force.²⁸ To do so, we must improve how we assess the qualities embedded in the Marshall Trinity. Three current initiatives provide case studies in this effort: the Army’s CAP, the NLAP, and the DEOCS.

Navy Leadership Assessment Program

The NLAP is a supplement to traditional command qualification processes that provides sailors with deeper evaluations of leadership style, self-

Recommendations and Conclusion

The moral dimension of leadership—so often assumed yet rarely measured—must be brought into focus. If morale is central to warfighting, then we must equip commanders to cultivate it and hold them accountable for doing so. The following recommendations translate the Marshall Trinity into institutional reforms:

1. Define Morale Jointly and Codify Its Importance

The Services should advocate for a single, authoritative definition of morale to be included in the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. This definition should:

- Emphasize morale as both a psychological and moral quality.
- Capture its role in unit cohesion, readiness, and retention.
- Distinguish morale from welfare or satisfaction.

A shared definition enables shared evaluation criteria—and aligns expectations across the force. This article offers the following definition for morale through the lens of unit purpose and moral responsibility of the commander:

“Morale: The enduring spirit of confidence, enthusiasm, and collective pride within a military unit that sustains the will to endure combat, overcome adversity, and accomplish the mission. Morale is the psychological component of military effectiveness and a critical factor in unit cohesion, readiness, and retention. Commanders are the principal stewards of morale and bear the moral responsibility to foster morale as an essential component of their unit’s will to fight.”

2. Standardize Assessment of Moral Command Competency

All Services should implement formal evaluations of officers’ capacity to foster morale, incorporating:

- Behavioral interviews with questions about past leadership under stress.
- 360-degree feedback mechanisms assessing trust, empathy, and cohesion.
- Scenario-based judgment tests measuring *phronēsis* and *coup d’œil*.

Initiatives like CAP and NLAP should be expanded, refined, and jointly stud-

ied to inform a Service-wide framework.

3. Integrate Virtue Ethics into PME and Command Education

As Thomas Statler and others have observed, virtue ethics remains underrepresented in PME.³⁴ Leadership education must go beyond compliance and decision-making models to explore:

- The habits that shape moral character.
- The responsibilities of command beyond legal directives.
- The cost of moral failure in terms of trust, retention, and readiness.

Commanders should leave PME not just informed—but formed.

4. Evaluate Commanders Not Only on Results, but on Morale Effects

Performance reviews and post-command evaluations should include metrics tied to unit morale:

- Longitudinal trends from DEOCS and other surveys.
- Retention rates, discipline metrics, and peer feedback.
- Qualitative reviews of command climate and troop trust.

Morale cannot be entirely quantified—but it can be observed, and its patterns tracked over time.

Conclusion: Leadership as Moral Stewardship

The 2025 memo demands reforms to select the most qualified leaders. By framing morale as moral responsibility and applying the Marshall Trinity, the Joint Force can evaluate officers not just on outputs, but on character. In great-power competition, such commanders provide an asymmetric advantage: resilient units, high retention, and unwavering lethality. Taking *responsibility for morale* is not optional—it is the *essence of command*.

The moral burden of command is revealed in moments of ambiguity, hardship, and risk. The commander who accepts morale as a moral responsibility does not simply obey regulations—they inspire confidence, loyalty, and resilience. They embody the Marshall Trinity: joyful responsibility, practical wisdom, and intuitive clarity.

Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardians, and Marines deserve leaders whose character strengthens their command—

and whose command strengthens the nation. Reforming evaluation and selection procedures around this truth is not just a bureaucratic necessity. It is a strategic imperative.

Notes

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